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My Little Force Explodes: A Re-creation of the Assembly of Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 18

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"My Little Force Explodes:"
A Re-creation of the Assembly of
Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 18

Katie Brokaw
2002



This is my letter to the World –

It is hard to recall my exact first encounter with Emily Dickinson. In some ways, I feel as though I have always known her. I remember quoting *A word is dead/ When it is said, / Some say. / I say is just / Begins to live / That day* to my Junior High language arts class. Throughout the years, Dickinson has grown with me, in me.

In the summer of 2000, I began an independent study focusing on ED's fascicles. It was during that summer that I chose to focus on F. 18, by virtue of the fact that it contains "After Great Pain," a poem which is the quintessence of my fascination with ED. I came to see this fascicle as a microcosm, a distilled version of ED's personal crises and her crucial relationship with the world.

During the last year, I have read biographies, critical exegeses and analyses, as well as undertaking a detailed textual study of ED's poems and letters. My original plan, to write a dissertation on F.18, pulling together textual variants, biographical information, and critical interpretations, became subsumed by the idea of a more intimate and dynamic presentation. I had simply grown too close.

My project advisor, Prof. Bob Bray, suggested that I present the assembly of fascicle 18 as a dramatic monologue, an idea I seized with avidity. The resulting piece, written this spring, is informed by my research, my theatre major, and my love of ED.

Enclosed you will find:

- a copy of my handwritten version of the 17-poem fascicle 18
- an essay in which I explore each of the poems of the fascicle independently, and in their relation to the fascicle as a poetic sequence
- a few copies of poems from ED's own F. 18 manuscript, especially those in which I have made use of variant readings
- an annotated bibliography of the primary and secondary sources I read in preparation for this project
- and, for a "slant," I have included 5 poems from the modern collection Visiting Emily: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Emily Dickinson. You'll find Billy Collins' "Taking off Emily Dickinson's Clothes" (my favorite), "Emily Dickinson Reading Walt Whitman" (for R. Bray), "Emily Dickinson's Sestina for Molly Bloom" (for K.. O'Gorman), the dramatic piece "Two Ghosts" (for R. Bechtel), and John Berryman's "Your birthday in Wisconsin You are 140" (for J. O'Leary).

See you on the 22nd at 8:00!



My Little Force Explodes –
A Dramatic Monologue
by Katie Brokaw

August 16, 1862.

(Reads old letter from Sue)

Oh Sue. How strange it is to look back at these old letters. *A letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend.* I wonder if Sue re-reads my old letters. How desperate I must have sounded in so many of them! My first real love. Time never moved so slowly as it did when she was away those many months. I laugh now at my words to her from those days. *Who loves you most, and loves you best, and thinks of you when other rest?* I told her, how I loved her so dearly tho' felt so frightful. Of what was I afraid? Seems strange that I am afraid of the same things, right now, with Charles as I was with dear Susie. But now that the Tempest has settled, and she is across the lawn, my dear sister-in-law, and mother of little Ned. Aunt Emily – can you imagine? There were times.... I wanted her all for myself. And to think that now I more than share her with my own brother. And to think that I have found a new love! If only I could tell the desperate Emily of these old letters what the future holds for her and Sue....

(continues looking at letters)

Ah, here is one from last summer. I sent her a new poem, many read it in the 'Springfield Republican' this March. They called it, I believe, "The Sleeping" or some such nonsense. Why must we always need to Name everything? Sue was the first to read it. She's a quite good editor. I won't tell Mr. Bowles this, but I wish it were people like Sue who edited publications such as the 'Springfield Republican.' Well, so I wrote to Sue, and I sent her:

*Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,/Untouched by morning/And untouched by
noon,/Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,/Rafter of satin and Roof of
stone./Light laughs the breeze/In her Castle above them,/Babbles the Bee in a stolid
Ear,/Pipe the Sweet Birds in ignorant cadence-/Ah, what sagacity perished here!*

Sue did not like the second verse. I wrote a new one and sent it to her.

*Grand go the Years – in the Crescent – about them –/Worlds scoop their Arcs
–/And Firmaments – row–/Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender/Soundless as Dots
– on a Disc of Snow –*

I rather like it. I thought perhaps this verse would please her better. But Sue wrote back, "I am not suited dear Emily with the second verse – it is remarkable as the chain lightening that blinds us hot nights in the Southern sky but it does not go with the ghostly shimmer of the first verse as well as the other one." In fact, Sue goes on to say that she thinks the first verse is complete in itself and needs no other. *Her praise is good – to me – because I KNOW it KNOWS – and SUPPOSE – it MEANS –*. Ahh, well, someday I will

return to this poem. Of course many must think it completed, those who read the Springfield Republican must surely assume that I have moved on from it.

(looks at more letters)

Oh I would say I still miss Sue. Yes, of course I do. She is so close, physically, I know. And yet so much of her is far away, it was lost years ago. *I miss my biggest heart; my own goes wandering round, and calls for Susie – Friends are too dear to sunder, Oh they are far too few, and how soon they will go away where you and I cannot find them, DON'T let us forget these things, for their remembrance NOW will save us many an anguish when it is TOO LATE to love them!* Oh, to be separated from one's love. Is there anything in this world more painful? I tried to bring her closer, now I try to bring HIM closer, my heart is so full of them both! But Charles. If he were here, and Oh that he was! *We need not talk at all, our eyes would whisper for us, and we would not ask for language.* So much of my heart wanders away from me!

Here is my new poem. Oh this is my LIFE.

It's thoughts – and just One Heart—/And Old Sunshine – about – /Make frugal – Ones – Content –/ And two or three – for Company –/Upon a Holiday –/Crowded – as Sacrament –//Books – when the Unit—/Spare the Tenant – long eno' –/A Picture if it Care –/Itself – a Gallery too rare –/For needing more—//Flowers – to keep the Eyes – from going awkward –/When it Snows—/A Bird – if they prefer—Though Winters fire – sing clear as Plover--/ To our – ear--//A Landscape – not so great/To Suffocate the Eye--

*/A Hill – perhaps--/Perhaps – the profile of a Mill/Turned by the Wind/Tho’ SUCH – are
LUXURIES--//It’s thoughts – and just TWO Heart--/And Heaven – about/ At least – a
Counterfeit--/We would not have correct --/And Immortality – can be almost – Not quite
– Content–.*

Should I send this one to Mr. Higginson? A married man, does he know what it is LIKE
for your heart to wander? How has he loved? Who has he loved? To love.... that is it, you
know. I say, *Unable are the Loved – to die—For love is immortality – Nay – it is Diety--*.
Love, death, immortality, Diety.... Would I write poetry if I understood these things?

Well, back to it. Shall I send this one to Higginson? We have been corresponding,
since April. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, of the ‘Atlantic Monthly’ and me! My new
friend, can you believe it? I wrote him, listen to this, I asked him if he *were too deeply
occupied to say if my Verse is alive?* I wonder what he thought of that! We have been in
correspondence since then. He shall be a wonderful friend. We have discussed Keats and
the Brontes and the Brownings, and his world and my own. And my poetry! He has asked
for a picture of me. Why do you suppose he would want such a thing? Could he believe
me —without? I told him that I have none, *no portrait, now, but I am small, like the
Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur – and my eyes, like Sherry in the Glass
that the Guest leaves – would this do just as well?*

I do not know what will become of this relationship. He suggests that I delay “to
publish.” I smile at that, *that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin*. I told

him, *if fame belonged to me, I could not escape her – if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase.* Perhaps Sue is still my best reader. Higginson thinks my gait is *spasmodic, I am in danger! He thinks me uncontrolled, and I have no Tribunal.* And so he suggested that I need help, to bring order to my poems. I asked him be that friend, my Preceptor, and it seems to me that he will be. What will he do to my poetry?

(looks around at papers)

Oh look at this mess! How could I ever organize my poems as Higginson suggests I must? If I just leave them like this, will they be lost? Today I am writing him and enclosing two more poems. I wonder if he will find these to be better? I shall ask him straight. (writing) *Dear friend – Are these more orderly? I thank you for the Truth—I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize – my little Force explodes – and leaves me bare and charred – I think you call me “Wayward.” Will you help me improve?*

I AM trying to organize my poetry, really I am. It is more than I can bear to see my poems in print, titled and regularized, and robbed of me. But maybe someday, after I am gone, Vinnie or Sue will find these poems? And if they are in a state as such, will they just throw them away? I have been binding them together in these little booklets. Maybe it's no use. To spend this time recopying my poems and stitching them together. But it is easier for me to have these little groups. I am putting together a new one, today. I think I shall start it off with, *It's thoughts – and just One Heart.*

Will my poetry outlive me? I wonder, did Shakespeare ask this? Did he know that I would be reading his words centuries after they were first uttered by the Lord Chamberlain's men? Oh, Shakespeare. *Why is any other book needed?*

"Nature wants stuff to vie strange forms with fancy, but to imagine an Antony were nature's piece 'gainst fancy, contemning shadows quite."

If I read a book, and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know THAT is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know THAT is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?

I am chilled, to the core. It all becomes too much for me. To read you, Shakespeare. To miss you, my Charles, my master. AH I am frozen. Here is a poem I wrote yesterday. If any of these shall outlive me, I wish it would be this.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes--/The nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs--/The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that Bore,'/And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?!/ The feet, mechanical, go round--/A Wooden way/Of ground, or Air, or Ought--/Regardless grown,/A Quartz Contentment, like a stone// This is the Hour of Lead--/Remembered, if outlived,/As freezing persons, recollect the Snow--/First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

I rather like the line, "A quartz contentment, like a stone." That is there for Charles. When I fell in love with him we were having a conversation about rocks, funny as it may seem. He preached a sermon, it was quite wonderful, really it was! He says that "the

value of a gem is not in its composition, but in its crystallization. Even the diamond is composed mainly of carbon, and differs from the black coal of our furnaces only in this mysterious transfiguration. But the spiritual man has, through gracious crystallization, become a gem, reflecting Divine light, and thus fitted for a diadem.”

Such a clever metaphor, don't you agree? Well, he is a preacher. I know, all must think it so strange that I, Emily, love this man of the church! But he is different in life. He really is almost as shy as I am! Oh it has been two years since I have seen him, my bright absentee! Can one quantify how much she misses someone? Do I ache for Charles more than I ever ached for Sue? It is probably all the same. But oh those Wild Nights! And now I am left with no one to make love with but the wind. Your Daisy is crying out for you!

*I tend my flowers for thee—/ Bright Absentee!! My Fuchsia's Coral Seams / Rip – While
the sower – dreams –// Geraniums – tint and spot— / Low Daisies – dot –/ My Cactus
splits her Beard /To show her throat—// Carnations – tip their spice—/ And Bees – pick
up—/ A Hyacinth – I hid—/ Puts out a Ruffled Head—/ And odors fall / From flasks – so
small—/ You marvel how they held—// Globe roses – break their satin flake –/ Upon my
Garden floor –/ Yet – thou – not there – / I had as lief they bore— / No Crimson more— //
Thy flower – be gay—/ Her Lord – away!! It ill becometh me—/ I'll dwell in Calyx – Gray—/
How modestly – alway—/ Thy Daisy—/ Draped for thee!*

I shall include that poem in this collection. What would Charles think of this poetry I write for him? I blush at the thought of him reading it, but I WANT him to KNOW. Here is another:

I envy seas – whereon He rides–/ I envy Spokes of Wheels/ Of Chariots, that Him convey–/ I envy crooked Hills// That gaze upon His journey–/ How easy all can see/ What is forbidden utterly/ As Heaven – unto me!!! I envy Nests of Sparrows–/That dot his distant Eaves–/The wealthy Fly, upon His Pane–/The happy–happy Leaves–// That just abroad His Window/ Have summer’s leave to Play–/ The Ear Rings of Pizarro/ Could not obtain for me–/ I envy Light – that wakes Him–/ And Bells – that boldly ring/ To tell Him it is Noon, abroad–/ Myself – be Noon to Him–// Yet interdict my Blossom–/ And abrogate – my Bee–/ Lest Noon in Everlasting Night–/ Drop Gabriel – and Me–

What shall I do? Does he think of me? How can I know when I hear no word from him! I wrote him last week, this letter that I shall send – someday. *Oh, did I offend it – Didn’t it want me to tell it the truth. Daisy–Daisy–offend it—who bends her smaller life to his meeker every day—who asks – as task—something to do for love of it—some little way she cannot guess to make that master glad—A love so big it scares her, rushing among her small heart—pushing aside the blood and leaving her faint and white in the gust’s arm—*. No more, no more reading my love letters!

How can this man have such power over me? What am I to him? For, it seems as though
HE would put God before me. But would I say the same? To love God as he does, might
ease my pain. Do I love God more than Charles? How do I love something I cannot see?
*I know that he exists/Somewhere—in silence--/He has hid his rare life/From our gross
eyes/ 'Tis an instant's play--/'Tis a fond Ambush--/Just to make Bliss/Earn her own
surprise/ /But—should the play/Prove piercing earnest--/Should the glee—glaze--/In
Death's—stiff-stare--//Would not the fun/Look too expensive!// Would not the jest--/Have
crawled too far!*

I shall put this one in with these other poems. Oh there are so many about God. God,
God, where ARE you? To miss Charles, to miss Sue, is pain. But to miss GOD, is
unbearable. Is it a joke? Or a test? Why would God be so cruel?

*He strained my faith--/Did he find it supple?/Shook my strong trust--/Did it
then—yield?/Hurled my belief--/But did he shatter—it?/Racked with Suspense--/Not a
nerve failed!// Wrung me—with Anguish--/But I never doubted him—(writing in)
/Or—Must be—I deserved it--/Tho' for what wrong/He did never say-/Stabbed while I
sued/His sweet forgiveness--/Jesus – it's your little 'John'!/Don't you know—me?*

“Don't you know me?” Perhaps it should be “Why – Slay – me?” I'll write them both.

My “readers” can decide which is best. But there are two more, two more about me and
God, that I think should be in this family.

This World is not conclusion/ A species stands beyond--. Or should I say a “sequel”
stands beyond? *Invisible as Music—But positive, as Sound—/It beckons, and it baffles--*
/Philosophy, don’t know--/And through a Riddle, at the last—/Sagacity, must go—I like
that word, “sagacity,” don’t I?! *To guess it, puzzles scholars—Or to “prove it” puzzles*
scholars? *To gain it, Men have borne/ Contempt of Generations/ And Crucifixion,*
shown—/ Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies--/Blushes, if any see—/Plucks at a twig of
Evidence—/And asks a Vane, the way—/Much Gesture, from the Pulpit—/Strong
Hallelujahs roll—/Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul—. Or is it a
mouse that nibbles at the soul?

I do hope that Charles is not offended by the “much gesture from the pulpit.” He knows that that is not him. We have all seen them though – those who are SURE. How can they just think that they KNOW? Or is it a façade? I’ll bet that those preachers of the strong hallelujahs lay awake at night in just as much doubt as you or me! So many times as a child, I would have waking nightmares, before I even fell asleep. Imagining my own death, suffocating in my mortality, I would cry out until mother or father would come to my room. “Trust God, Emily,” they would say. Or, “Pray, child, and you will find assurance.” And I am told, “Knock and it shall be opened unto you!” But what of THAT?

*At least to – to pray – is left – is left--/Oh Jesus – in the Air--/ I know not which thy
chamber is--/I'm knocking – everywhere--//Thou settest Earthquakes in the South --/ And
Maelstrom, in the Sea --/ Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth--/ Hast though no arm for Me?*

Can I love Jesus if I do not believe in him? I do indeed. There is so much I don't
understand. Oh Emily, why Emily? How is did there come to be an Emily? I tell Charles,
*God made me – Master – I didn't be – myself. I don't know how it was done. Why so
many questions? Would I find answers in church? But I dislike religious doctrine so.
When Jesus tells us about his Father, we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we
turn away, but when he confides to us that he is “acquainted with Grief,” we listen, for
that also is an Acquaintance of our own.*

Sometimes I grieve for those who have not yet died. I even grieve for Emily, poor me!
For I shall miss myself so greatly when I am gone that my mortality becomes more than I
can bear. It is *beyond our faint conjecture – our dizzy Estimate–*. Oh in this poem I say
through gentle Miracle of Death – the way ourself must come. Do you mean that Emily?
Through curious way of death? Through easy way of death? See me try to assure myself,
'tis not difficult to die. 'Tis not difficult to be dead, I guess, I prove, but oh! To be *As far
from pity, as complaint – as cool to speech – as stone–/ As numb to revelation / As if my
trade were Bone– // As far from Time – as History–/ As near yourself – Today–/ As
Children, to the Rainbow's scarf–/ Or Sunset's yellow play // To eyelids in the*

*Sepulchre—/ How dumb the Dancer lies -/ While Color's Revelations break— And blaze
the Butterflies! Shall these poems go into this group? Yes, I think so. And another will fit,
'Twas the old road through pain—/ That unfrequented – One—/ With many a turn – and
thorn—/ That stops – at Heaven— I hope it does stop, when it stops, at Heaven.*

All this talk of death and my general uneasiness with God – my readers will think me so morbid! *They say God is everywhere, and yet we tend to think of him as somewhat of a recluse.* Like me, of course. Perhaps God is shy – and perfectly content in his quiet existence, so that he needn't be bothered by wavering, questioning souls like me! If that were the case, to be frustrated with God would have been quite the irony, huh? I know my friends are frustrated with me. Vinnie has told me that she is embarrassed when someone calls on me and she must tell them that I have refused their company. It's not that I don't love them – but it all becomes too much – perhaps I am becoming as deaf to their knocking as God is to mine! It's not that I am angry or sad about my life – or lonely. *I find ecstasy in living – the mere sense of living is joy enough. But, enough is Enough! To live is so startling, it leaves but little room for other occupations.*

And I am occupied, I have much to do. Carlo, my sweet dog, is the dearest companion anyone could ask for. People might laugh at this, but he is quite a good listener as well, and I sometimes think of him as one of my best poetry critics! Sagacious old dog – who would understand the comfort your warm embrace gives me – the joy I get

from our mysterious adventures? Just the other day it was Carlo's wise response to a magical encounter of ours that inspired my poem: *Within my Garden, rides a Bird / Upon a single Wheel—/ Whose spokes a dizzy music make / As 'twere a travelling Mill—// He never stops, but slackens/ Above the Ripest Rose—/ Partakes without alighting/ And praises as he goes,// Till every spice is tasted—/ And then his Fairy Gig/ Reels in remoter atmospheres—/ And I rejoin my Dog// And He and I, perplex us/ If positive, 'twere we—/ Or bore the Garden in the Brain/ This Curiosity—// But He, the best Logician/ Refers my clumsy eye—/ To just vibrating Blossoms!! An Exquisite Reply!* Ah yes, Carlo, we will put your poem into this group. And which others, dear dog? So as to not frighten my readers into thinking that I am a depressed and weird recluse, just the half-cracked daughter of Ed Dickinson! Ah, here is a nice one. We get such joy from the seasons, don't we Carlo? And especially, especially, glorious Summer, that wondrous time that is, right now, fast retreating. *I know a place where Summer strives / With such a practised Frost—/ She – each year – leads her Daisies back—/ Recording briefly – “Lost”—/ But when the South Wind stirs the Pools/ And struggles in the Lanes—/ Her Heart misgives her, for Her Vow - / And she pours soft refrains // Into the lap of Adamant—/ And spices – and the Dew – / That stiffens quietly to Quartz —/ Opon her Amber Shoe.* Oh and it will be fall soon! And then the winter, the cold, frozen, bitter Massachusetts winter. I have so long to wait until Spring brings me the next summer. But, in the dead of January, I know, always, *that It Will be Summer eventually.* It will be summer eventually.... Ah yes, here it is. Another

good one for this group, with ladies and parasols and sauntering gentleman, and lilacs...
 and bees. They shall enjoy this one! I do get such joy from looking out my happy window
 here, and my garden, my garden contains a whole world. I know there is a whole world
 beyond this house. Sometimes I long.... To get on a ship and travel far, far West. To find
 Charles? Perhaps. To see mountains and deserts and the great Pacific. But oh! The
 strangers. Oh! The dangers. My ship would sink, I am afraid of losing myself. If I were to
 leave this place, physically, I feel as though my soul would remain in this very room, and
 perhaps never catch up with me! I long for adventure, sometimes, sometimes... but I
 should miss Carlo. To find Charles, to steal him away! To see the world together! Can I
 imagine that happiness ? Would I deserve such a heavenly existence? *Is bliss then, such*
Abyss –/I must not put my foot amiss / For fear I spoil my shoe? // I'd rather suit my food
/ Than save my Boot–/ For yet to buy another Pair / Is possible,/ At any store–/ But Bliss,
is sold just once / The Patent lost / None buy it any more–/ Say, Foot, decide the point!//
The Lady cross, or not?/ Verdict for Boot!

Am I destined to remain here for the rest of my days? Well, I suppose I have had
 my share of joy in my 32 years. And, oh, the ecstasy – the rapture that was those precious
 days with Charles. It would be selfish of me to demand more from life. *My reward for*
being was This – my Premium – my Bliss. Yes, put that one in here, too. How many
 poems do I have altogether now in this collection? 16. I need one more – one last poem.

Oh Look at these Emily! What will that world of strangers think of them? Right now I hear their laughter in my ears – I see their blank faces. “My, my. What IS this woman saying?” But someday, someday, will another soul read these and say “YES, Emily, Yes. I know.” Someday? Here they are, dear readers who I will never meet. A letter to your soul. And if you understand, then, truly, I am immortal. For my poetry is

Better than Music! For I – who heard it–/ I was used to the Birds –/ before–/ This – was different – ‘Twas..... ‘Twas, ‘Twas. What was it? ‘Twas Translation/ Of all turns I knew – and more–// ‘Twasn’t, well, it wasn’t bound into any sort of form, was it? ‘Twasn’t contained – like other stanza–/ No one could play it – the second time–/ But the composer – perfect (yes perfect!) – Mozart - /Perish with him – That keyless Rhyme!// So - Children --told how Brooks in Eden– no, Children assured that Brooks in Eden/ Bubbles a better– Melody–/ Quaintly infer – Eve’s great her great what? Her great.... Surrender–/ Urging the feet Oh yes! The feet! Say, Lady, decide the point! Urging the feet – that would – not – fly–// Children – matured (grown up?) are wiser – mostly–/ Eden – a legend – dimly told. Told? Or learned? Or... or, crooned? Eden – a legend – dimly learned/ Eve – and the Anguish (poor Eve!) Grandame’s story–/ But – I was telling a tune – I heard–// What’s next? Heaven.... Heaven. And church. Yes, we must. Not such a strain – the Church – baptizes/ When the last Saint – goes up the Aisles–/ Not such a stanza splits the silence–/ When the Redemption strikes her Bells// No, when the

redemption *shakes* her bells. *Let me not spill, or, lose? its smallest cadence.* No, let me
not waste *its smallest cadence/ Humming* yes, Carlo, Humming! Humming like our dear
miracle hummingbird! *Humming – for promise – when alone–/ Humming – until my faint*
Rehearsal–/ Drop into tune – around the Throne.

So here it is!.... *Better than Music! For I – who heard it–/ I was used to the Birds*
–/ before–/ This – was different – ‘Twas Translation/ Of all tunes I knew – and more–//
‘Twasn’t contained – like other stanza–/ No one could play it – the second time–/ But the
composer – Mozart – /Perish with him – That keyless Rhyme!// So - Children -- assured
that Brooks in Eden/ Bubbles a better– Melody–/ Quaintly infer – Eve’s great Surrender/
Urging the feet – that would – not – fly–// Children – matured are wiser – mostly–/ Eden
– a legend – dimly learned / Eve – and the Anguish Grandame’s story–/ But – I was
telling a tune – I heard–//Not such a strain – the Church – baptizes/ When the last Saint –
goes up the Aisles–/ Not such a stanza splits the silence–/ When the Redemption strikes
her Bells// Let me not waste its smallest cadence/ Humming – for promise – when alone–/
Humming – until my faint Rehearsal–/ Drop into tune – around the Throne.

It's thoughts - and just One Heart -
And old Sunshine - about -
Make frugal - One - Content -
And two or three - for Company -
Upon a Holiday -
Crowded - as Sacrament -

Books - when the Unit -
Spare the Tenant - long env' -
A Picture if it Care -
Itself - a Gallery too rare -
For needing more -

* Vatican

Flowers - to keep the Eyes - from going awkward -
When it snows -
A Bird - if they - prefer -
Though Winter fire - sing clear as Plover -
To our - ear -

A Landscape - not so great
To suffocate the Eye -
A Hill - perhaps -
Perhaps - the profile of a Mill
Turned by the Wind
Tho' such - are luxuries -

It's thoughts - and just two Heart -
And Heaven - about -
At least - a Counterfeit -
We would not have correct -
And immortality - can be almost -
Not quite - content -

I know a place where Summer stives
With such a practised Frost—
She - each year - leads her Daisies back—
Recording briefly - "Lost"—

But when the South Wind stirs the Pools
And struggles in the lanes—
Her Heart misgives Her, for Her Vow—
And she paws soft refrains

Into the lap of Adamant—
And spias - and the Dew—
That stiffens quietly to Quartz—
Upon her Amber Shoe—

As far from pity, as Complaint—
As cool to speech—as stone—
As numb to Revelation
As if my Trade were Bone—

As far from Time—as History—
As near yourself—Today—
As Children to the Rainbow's scarf—
Or Sunset's Yellow play

To eyelids in the Sepulchre—
How *dumb the Dancer lies—
While Color's Revelations break—
And blaze—the Butterflies!

* still

✓

I know that He exists.
Somewhere - in silence -
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play -
'Tis a fond Ambush -
Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprise!

But - should the play
Prove piercing earnest -
Should the glee - glaze -
In Death's - stiff - stare -

Would not the *fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest -
Have crawled so far!

*"joke"

He strained my faith—
Did he find it supple?
Shook my strong trust—
Did it then—yield?

Harled my belief—
But—did he shatter—it?
Racked—with suspense—
Not a nerve failed!

Wrong me—with Anguish—
*But I never doubted him— or—^{written underneath} *Must be—I deserved it—
Tho' for what wrong
He did never say—

Stabbed—while I sued
His sweet forgiveness—
Jesus—its your little "John"!
*Don't you know-me?

*Why—Slay—Me?
^{written underneath, later}

I tend my flowers for thee — 1
Bright Absentee! 2
My Fuchrias Coral seams 3
Kiss - while the Sower - dreams - 4

Geraniums - tint - and spot - 5
Low Daisies - dot - 6
My Cactus - splits her Beard 7
To show her throat - 8

Carnations - tip their spice - 9
And Bees - pick up - 10
A Hyacinth - I hid - 11
Puts out a Ruffled Head - 12
And odors fall 13
From flasks - so small - 14
You marvel how they held - 15

Globe Roses - break their satin flake - 16
Upon my Garden floor - 17
Yet - there - not there - 18
I had as lief they bore 19
No Crimson - more - 20

Thy flower - be gay - 21
Her Lord - away! 22
It ill becometh me - 23
I'll dwell in Calyx - Gray - 24
How modestly - always - 25
Thy Daisy - 26
Draped for thee! 27

I envy seas - *whereon He rides - *that bear Him
I envy Spokes of Wheels
Of Chariots, that Him convey -
I envy *Crooked Hills *speechless hills

That *gaze upon His journey - *grow along
How easily All can see
What is *forbidden utterly *desired
As *Heaven - unto me! *Eden

I envy Nests of Sparrows -
That dot His distant Eaves -
The *wealthy Fly, upon His Pane - -happy
The happy - happy Leaves -

That just abroad His Window
Have Summer's leave to Play -
The Ear Rings of Pizarro
Could not obtain for me -

I envy Light - that wakes Him -
And Bells - that boldly *ring *Come
To tell Him it is Noon, abroad -
Myself - be Noon to Him -

Yet interdict, my Blossom -
And abrogate - my Bee -
Lest Noon *in Everlasting Night - *down
Drop Gabriel - and Me -

Those *fair - fictitious People -
The Women *plucked away
From our *familiar *lifetime -
The Men of Ivory -

* fair
* plucked away
* address - gazing
* familiar ~~notice~~ notice - fingers

Those Boys and Girls, in Canvas -
Who *stay upon the Wall
In Everlasting *Keepsake -
*Can Anybody tell? *where are they - Can you tell

We trust - in places perfecter -
Inheriting Delight
Beyond our *faint Conjecture - *small
Our *dimmy Estimate - *scanty

Remembering ourselves, we trust -
Yet Blessed - than We -
Through Knowing - where We only *hope - *guess
*Receiving - where we - pray - *beholding

Of Expectation - also -
Anticipating us
With transport, that would be a pain
Except for Holiness -

Esteeming us - as Exile -
themselves - admitted Home -
Through ~~many~~ gentle Miracle of Death - *curious, easy
The Way ~~ourselves~~, must come -

Within my Garden, rides a Bird
Upon a single Wheel -
Whose spokes a dizzy music make
As 'twere a travelling Mill -

He never stops, but slackens
Above the Ripest Rose -
Partakes without a lighting
And praises as he goes,

Till every spice is tasted -
And then his ^{*}Fairy Gig
Reels in remoter atmospheres -
And I rejoin my Dog,

* microscopic Gig

And He and I, perplex us
If positive, 'twere we -
Or bore the Garden in the Brain
This Curiosity -

But He, the best Logician,
Refers my ^{*}clumsy eye -
To just Vibrating Blossoms!
An exquisite Reply!

* duller

← same page

Is Bliss then, such Abyss—
I must not put my foot amiss
For fear I spoil my shoe?

I'd rather suit my foot
Than save my Boot—
Forget to buy another Pair
As possible,
At any store—

But Bliss, is sold just once.
The Patent lost
None buy it any more—
Say, Foot, decide the point!
The Lady Cross, or not?
Verdict for Boot!

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -
The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that Bore,'
And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

1 The Feet, mechanical, go round -
2 A Wooden way
3 Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
4 Regardless grown,
A Quarty Contentment, like a stone

This is the Hour of Lead -
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -

This World is not conclusion.

A *Species stands beyond-
Invisible, as Music -

* a sequel

But positive, as Sound -

It beckons, and it baffles -

Philosophy, don't know -

And through a Riddle, at the last -

Sagacity, must go -

To guess it, puzzles scholars -

prove it

To gain it, Men have borne

Contempt of Generations

And Crucifixion, shown -

Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -

Blushes, if any see -

Plucks at a tangle of Evidence -

And asks a Vane, the way -

Much Gesture, from the Pulpit -

* Strong Hall elyaks roll -

Sure -

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth

Mouse -

- That nibbles at the soul -

It will be Summer - eventually.

Ladies - with parasols -

Sauntering Gentlemen - with Canes -

And little Girls - with Dolls -

Will tint the pallid landscape -

As I were a bright Boquet -

Tho' drifted deep, in Parcan -

The Village lies - today -

The Lilacs - bending many a year -

Will sway with Purple load -

The Bees - will not despise the tune -

Their Forefathers - have hummed -

The Wild Rose - redden in the Bog -

The Aster - on the Hill

Her everlasting fashion - set -

And Covenant Gentians - frill -

Till Summer folds her miracle -

As Women - do - their Gown -

Or Priests - adjust the Symbols -

When Sacrament - is done -

My Reward for Being, was This -
My premium - My Bliss -
An Admirably, less -
A Sceptre - penniless -
And Realms - just Dross -

When Thrones - acost my Hands -
With "Me, Miss, Me" -
I'll unroll - Thee -

* Dominions - dowerless - beside this Grace -
Election - Vote -
The Ballots of Eternity, will show just that.

(903)
* Sufficient Dynasty -
Creation - powerless -
To Peer this Grace -
Empire - State -
Too little - Dust -
To Dower - so Great -

'
Twas the old-road-through pain-
That unfrequented - One -
With many a turn-and thorn -
That stops-at Heaven -

This-was the Town-she passed
There-where she-rested-last -
Then-stepped more fast -
The little tracks-close past -
Then-not so swift -
Slow-slow-as feet did weary-grow -
Then-stopped-no other track!

Wait! Look! Her little Book -
The leaf-at love-turned back -
Her very Hat -
And this worn shoe just fits the track -
Herself-though-fled!

Another bed-a short one -
Women make-tonight -
In Chambers bright -
Too out of sight-though -
For one hoarse Good Night -
To touch her Head!

← same page

At least - to pray - is left - is left -

Oh Jesus - in the Air -

I know not which thy ^{*}chamber is - ^{*}palaces -
I'm knocking - everywhere -

Thou ^{*}settest Earthquakes in the South - ^{*}stirrest

And Maelstrom, in the Sea -

Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth -

Hast thou no arm for Me?

Better - than Music! For I - who heard it -
I was used - to the Birds - before -
This - was different - 'Twas Translation -
Of all tunes I knew - and more -

'Twasn't contained - like other stanya -
No one could play it - the second time -
But the Composer - perfect - Mozart -
Perish with him - that Keyless Rhyme!

* So - Children * told how Broods in Eden - * Children ^{se}
Bubbled a better - Melody - * assured that
Quaintly infer - Eve's great surrender -
Urging the feet - that would - not - fly -

Children * matured - are wiser - mostly - grown up
Eden - a legend - dimly * told - learned - crowned
Eve - and the Anguish - Grandam's story -
But - I was telling a tune - I heard -

Not such a strain - the Church - baptizes -
When the last Saint - goes up the Kises -
Not such a stanya splits the silence -
When the Redemption * strikes her Bells - shakes -

Let me not * spill - its smallest cadence - lose - waste -
Humming - for promise - when alone -
Humming - until my faint Rehearsal -
Drop into tune - around the Throne -

“Don’t you know – me?:” Emily Dickinson’s Fascicle 18

Autumn of 1862 was the middle of a period of astonishing productivity for Emily Dickinson. During this time, she bound many of her poems into little books called fascicles, each containing a number of poems running the gamut of emotion and poetic experience. Each fascicle, of which the arbitrarily numbered F.18 is typical, can be seen as a microcosm of the universe of ED’s enormous output of poetry and letters.

One of the first things one notices about ED’s poetry is her direct use of language; it feels more like speech than reading. But, as is the case when listening to any impassioned utterance, one is alive to the timbre sometimes more than the sense: “I understand fury in your words, but not your words” (*Othello*). ED’s world was small, her experience limited. Yet her poetry can capture and recreate the depths of human emotion – from deep pain to sheer bliss – by focusing on the particulars of her world. Babette Deutsch points out that Dickinson’s use of language and everyday experience are similar to a poet contemporary with ED, Walt Whitman:

Miss Dickinson’s intense concern for the unique and the particular and her thrifty accuracy have nothing Whitmanesque about them... but both were forerunners of those compatriots who returned poetry to its roots in common experience and the language of daily converse (qtd. in Sewall, 682).

In their book The Modern Poetic Sequence, Rosenthal and Gall also compare ED and Walt Whitman, calling both of them pioneers of the modern poetic sequence. This sequence is one that they describe as having “emotional volatility” and an intimate voice. It is also important that the sequence interact as an organic whole, instead of having a mechanical, uniform approach. This plasticity, they explain, better renders the “complexities of contemporary existence.”

Each of ED’s fascicles can be seen as a modern poetic sequence. When looking at fascicle 18, one is confronted immediately by the intense emotional range ED covers – from leaden depression to luminous quotidian, from longing and loss to translation. It would be hard to find a more emotionally volatile poet than ED. She also certainly has what Rosenthal and Gall would describe as an “intimate, self-conscious tonality.” Most of her poems are written in first person, and the reader feels certain that this “I” is ED herself. Even when there is no “I” in the poem, the “tragic pressure” on the dramatic speaker Rosenthal and Gall refer to is still felt.

The fact that ED’s poems interact as an organic whole is one of the most important characteristics of her fascicles. ED renders one experience at a time, and the poems are varied and shift rapidly from mood to mood, but there is design to this randomness. ED is rendering the complexities of her experience – an existence that cannot be organized into neat groupings of poems categorizing her emotions. Fascicle 18 contains the multitudes of her life – expressing everything from numbing, post-pain

paralysis to contentment. She is expressing her existence in a way similar to Walt Whitman in “Song of Myself,” who finally admits, “Very well then I contradict myself (I am large, I contain multitudes).”

Even in the middle of a poem, ED will undergo a complete mood shift, often, in fascicle 18, from assured certainty to doubt and despair. She is rendering for us the human condition – ever-changing, never constant or having a predictable pattern to it. The order of the poems is not as important as the fact that there *is* no order – the poems flow as freely as the uncensored thoughts of ED herself.

Rosenthal and Gall say that a modern poetic sequence provides a “complex music of feeling involving a number of radiant centers.” Each of the poems in ED’s fascicle 18 contains its own radiant center. The only way to begin to understand the complexities and chaos of ED’s unstable world is to look at each poem – one radiant center at a time.

The first poem of the sequence, “It’s thoughts – and just One Heart” sets up many of the themes and motifs that pervade fascicle 18: the contrast between summer and winter, ED’s obsession with immortality, and reclusion. In this poem, ED gives a glimpse into the simplicity of her daily life. She explains what she needs to be content (or at least “almost – not quite – content”). The restricted stimuli of her secluded life – sunshine, books, pictures, flowers, and a view out the window – are enough for her, if she also has her thoughts and her heart. ED did not need any more than this, for as she wrote

in a letter to Higginson in 1871, “To live is so startling, it leaves but little room for other occupations” (Ed. Todd, 264).

The most puzzling part of this poem is line 28, the first line of the last stanza. It is a word for word recapitulation of the first line, with one change: “It’s thoughts – and just *two* Heart” (italics added). The first mystery is the incorrect grammar – it should be two Hearts. But the use of the word “Heart,” especially in light of the first line and the reclusive nature of the poem, helps me infer that the “two Heart” Emily is referring to are two parts of her own heart. It is also possible that Dickinson is referring to an absent lover, and the two Heart alludes to his or her continued presence in her life. Whatever the case may be, the intrusion at line 28 of another Heart disrupts the contentedness of the poem. In line 3 ED affirms she is content, but after acknowledging the tense dichotomy in her heart she admits that this might not exactly be the case. She explains that if her world is not Heaven, at least it is a counterfeit and concludes by saying, “Immortality – can be almost – not quite – Content.” Clearly, this is an admission of ED’s spiritual turmoil as she questions her faith. This poem sets up a pattern in which ED will assert her faithfulness at the beginning of a poem, only later to admit that she has her doubts. This pattern will recur throughout the fascicle in “I know that He exists,” “This World is not conclusion,” and “At least – to pray – is left – is left.”

The next poem, “I Know a Place where Summer strives,” shows ED’s bias towards summer over winter. She equates summer with life, and perhaps even bliss,

whereas winter is often a metaphor for pain and death. These ideas are supported by later poems in the fascicle. Descriptions of summer – especially involving garden imagery – are present in the lively “I tend my flowers for thee –,” “Within my Garden rides a Bird,” and “It will be Summer – eventually.” The coldness of winter and death will be examined with my analysis of the “Freezing persons” of “After great pain, a formal feeling comes.”

Another important image in “I Know a Place where Summer strives” is the reference to rocks – Adamant, Quartz, and Amber. Stone imagery is also used in “As far from pity, as complaint,” and “After great pain, a formal feeling comes —.” In The Life of Emily Dickinson, Richard Sewall suggests that the idea of rock crystallization might have come to ED from a sermon given by Charles Wadsworth, a close friend of ED’s, and some scholars speculate he was also her lover. In the sermon, Wadsworth says that just as the value of a gem is in its crystallization, the spiritual man, through crystallization/transformation becomes a gem reflecting Divine light (456). In “I know a place where Summer strives,” the retreating summer preserves her dew and spices by stiffening “quietly to Quartz” when winter comes. It is interesting to note that ED copied out fascicle 18 in the autumn of 1862. ED is fascinated by the annual retreat of summer, and her personification of summer as a female makes me wonder if she doesn’t equate her own predicament to that of summer’s at the beginning of fall. She is unable to hold

on, and no matter how hard she tries, or promises herself she will stop trying, the inevitable event will be that the “practiced Frost” – winter or death – will win out.

“As far from pity as complaint,” the next poem in the fascicle, deals more directly with ED’s fear of death. It seems that this is a poem in which ED imagines herself already dead, or at least she is conjecturing the life of one who is dead. The first two stanzas set up a series of analogies. Each of the first three lines in these stanzas begins with the word “as” and is followed by an analogy that is both effective in proving the difference between the two ideas being compared, and as imagery setting up the death scene of this poem. The sentiments of pity and complaint are quite different, yet neither emotion is useful regarding death of oneself or another.

The next line, “As cool to speech – as stone” gives another example of stone imagery in ED poetry, and evokes gravestones, or a stone-cold corpse. Line 8 talks about the “Sunset’s Yellow play.” This bittersweet use of sunset imagery reminds me of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman (a little-known New England poet contemporary with ED) in his 5th sonnet, in which the speaker of the poem watches the “fading sun” and stands “stuck in grief.” He is unable to get any joy out of the sunset, just as ED is unable to find joy from the sunset if she is dead, either physically or spiritually. Tuckerman’s sonnet 5 utilizes natural imagery to describe immense psychic pain in a way similar to many of ED’s poems.

Lines 9 and 10 are puzzling at first and, ED seems to be mixing her metaphors:

“To eyelids in the Sepulchre-- / How dumb the dancer lies—“. In one statement, she is expressing a dead person’s inability to see, speak, and move. In the manuscript of this poem, ED writes in a revision: “dumb” can be replaced with the word “still.” While “How still the dancer lies” makes more sense, I think that her instincts were in the right place with the word “dumb.” This word better evokes the sense of the corpse’s helplessness and mute inarticulacy.

“I know that he exists” is one of several faith poems in fascicle 18. ED alluded to her wavering faith in “It’s thoughts – and just One Heart,” and she deals with it directly in this poem, in the following poem, “He strained my faith,” as well as in “This world is not conclusion” and “At least – to pray – is left – is left–.” In Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief, Roger Lundin explains, “To Emily Dickinson, perhaps the most notable fact about God was that he was, as she had become, so hard to find” (144). He also points out that the hiddenness of God was an important part of ED’s Protestant heritage. It is this inaccessibility that frustrates ED, sometimes to the point that she becomes angry with God. In “I know that He exists,” ED is worried that faith might be futile, religion a cruel joke that, upon death, she will realize, has “crawled too far.”

In “He strained my faith—“ ED uses violent words to describe what Jesus has done to her belief. It is “strained,” “shook,” “hurled,” “racked,” “wrung,” and “stabbed.” When I first read “He strained my faith,” I was perplexed by the third stanza:

Wrung me – with Anguish—
But I never doubted him –

Tho' for what wrong
He did never say—

The line “Tho' for what wrong” doesn't seem to make sense following “But I never doubted him—“. The manuscript of this poem revealed to me that under “But I never doubted him –“ ED has written “Or – Must be – I deserved – it –.” The Johnson edition of ED poems omits this line, and the Franklin variorum presents it as an alternative reading. I believe that this line is in fact part of the poem and the manuscript reinforces this. The idea of the speaker never doubting Jesus despite the torments, and the idea of the speaker deserving this torture are so different that I do not think they are interchangeable. Rather, ED wanted to express both of these thoughts, separating them with the word “Or –.” The lines “Tho' for what wrong / He did never say –“ make much more sense following “Must be – I deserved – it –.” Why else would she have been put through all this torture? She must have deserved it, though she expressed bitterness towards Jesus for never explaining why faith must be so difficult. The last stanza of the poem is a heartbreaking plea for proof. ED calls herself “John” – alluding to what must have been her favorite of Jesus' apostles. She wants desperately to be a follower of Jesus as well, but ends the poem with the lingering perplexity expressed by a question mark: “Jesus – it's your little 'John'! / Don't you know – me?”

The next two poems, “I tend my flowers for thee” and “I envy seas – whereon he rides” address ED’s lover in his absence. “I tend my flowers for thee” is filled with the bright imagery of a garden at summer’s full. Summer can be seen as symbolic of life, and the colorful flowers of this poem have the erotic connotations of a ripe woman’s body awaiting her absent lover. ED often uses flower imagery in her poetry, and, as she does in the following poem “I envy seas –” she frequently pairs this imagery with a bee, symbolic of the man. “I tend my flowers for thee” makes clever use of the pun on sow/sew. The speaker of the poem is both a sower of seeds and a sewer neglecting her seams:

I tend my flowers for thee –
Bright absentee!
My Fuchsia’s Coral Seams
Rip – while the Sower – dreams –

It is also interesting to note that the last stanza refers to “Thy Daisy,” which many scholars think was a nickname for ED given to her by a lover. In Positive as Sound, Judy Jo Small talks about this poem saying that, “In lush, sensuous images, the poem draws an extended, implied parallel between the gardener and the ‘Absentee,’ who similarly neglects his ‘Daisy,’ as the speaker of the poem calls herself” (239). I am reminded of Susan Firer’s poem “Pumpkin Seeds,” in which she says, “Whenever I see a tended/ garden, I can’t help it: I always assume the person who made it has some deep/ acquaintance with despair.” In her article “Reverence for each Other Being the Sweet

Aim: Dickinson Face to Face with the Masculine,” Helen Shoobridge explores the “erotic connotations of the ripe woman’s body as a garden awaiting an absent lover.” She thinks that in the last stanza, however, the speaker vows not to be so appealing while her lord is away (93). It is interesting that ED should use the archaic form of the word “always” in line 25: “How modestly – alway –.” Her new word “alway” looks and sounds similar to “away,” and so she is again reiterating that she dwells in “Calyx – Gray” in the absence of her lover.

“I envy seas whereon He rides” again addresses the inaccessibility of ED’s lover, an absence that frustrates her as much as the absence of God. It is interesting to note that ED capitalizes her pronouns in this poem – He, Him, and His as if speaking about a Divine Being. ED reaches desperation in this poem, envying even the “wealthy Fly” upon her lover’s window. In the fifth stanza, ED refers to the light that wakes him, saying that she wishes she could be noon to him, if it were allowable. When we see “Noon” as a symbol for the consummation of love and remember the connotations for flowers and bees, the concluding stanza demonstrates the intensity of ED’s attraction to her lover:

Yet interdict, my Blossom –
And abrogate – my bee –
Lest Noon in Everlasting Night –
Drop Gabriel – and Me –

The next poem, “Those fair – fictitious people” returns again to the theme of death, but it is more universalized and less personal with the lack of an “I” voice. ED reluctantly associates herself with the rest of the living, referring to “our,” “us,” and “we.” She reflects on the artistic representations – sculptures and paintings – of people who have since died, exploring the predicament of the living, able only to conjecture the fate of dead. But, our “dizzy estimate” concentrates on the possible continuities between life and death, “Remembering ourselves, we trust –.” The dead, however, are “knowing – where we only hope –.” ED suggested that a revision for the word “hope” could be “guess,” a word without theological implications.

The last stanza of the poem seems more complacent and peaceful towards death than the tortured questions of some of ED’s other poems. She thinks that the departed have been “admitted Home – / Through gentle Miracle of Death – /The Way ourself, must come –.” Yet in the marginal revisions ED changes her mind about calling the Miracle of Death “gentle,” suggesting also “easy,” and, the less serene “curious.”

“Within my Garden, rides a Bird,” the following poem, seems at first to be a simple account of ED’s encounter with a hummingbird. But the poem can also be seen as a philosophical debate about the nature of reality – the tension between the external world and the brain. Small analyzes the rhyme patterns of this poem. She points out that the slant rhyme of Gig/Dog in stanza three is unexpected, and gives the poem a comic shift. The first three stanzas use short vowel sounds to describe the light, airy nature of the

hummingbird: “Wheel, Mill, Rose, goes, etc.” The word “Dog” at the end of stanza three brings this airy vision down to the real and literally cynical world of dogs (124). At this point, the ethereal vision disappears, leaving ED and her dog wondering “was that then real?” to which the dog responds by pointing out proof of the hummingbird’s existence – the “just vibrating Blossoms.” This poem demonstrates ED’s desire for evidence, in everything from the smallest encounters to the existence of God and Heaven. ED wrote about the hummingbird more than once, and the last poem of the fascicle, “Better than Music!” uses the verb “humming” when describing ED’s moment of bliss.

The idea of bliss is more obviously addressed in the next poem, “Is Bliss then, such Abyss.” In this poem, ED explores her desire to try to attain bliss, which is overruled by her fear of failure. “Bliss” could mean a number of things. ED could be talking about the bliss of heaven, and her fears stem from feelings of unworthiness. Or perhaps she is referring to bliss with her lover, in which case the stakes are still high and there is a chance of failure.

In Strategies of Limitation, Jane Donahue Eberwein argues that the poem demonstrates ED’s habit of obedience that included “fidelity to parental cautions against anything that might injure their sheltered daughter.” Eberwein sees the speaker of this poem as a child yearning to set forth into the world, but finding that happiness requires crossing a barrier, for which she must risk her shoe to cross (109). ED knows that she only gets one shot at bliss, and that it is worth the risk for shoes are certainly replaceable.

But she presents herself as a failed adventurer when she gives the “Verdict for Boot!”

Lundin quotes a fragment of autobiography written by ED regarding her childhood:

Two things I have lost with Childhood – the rapture of loosing my shoe in the
Mud and going Home barefoot, wading for Cardinal flowers and then mothers
reproof which was more for my sake than her weary own for she frowned with a
smile...(22).

The fact that ED vividly recalls the experience of losing a shoe in the mud and being reprimanded for it by her mother points to obvious correlations with “Is Bliss then, such Abyss.” It seems that she longs for both the reckless abandon of childhood and the safety of a mother who looks after her.

The next poem, “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” is one of ED’s most well-known and frequently analyzed poems. It is unique in its utilization of pentameter, but more important to those who love this poem is the startling, desolate imagery of ED’s verse. It is obvious that ED had overcome some sort of paralyzing trauma in order to write this poem, though scholars are puzzled as to what this may be.

In After Great Pain, Cody explores the relationship of ED’s seclusion to the feelings evoked in this poem. He wonders how ED could feel such psychic devastation living secluded in the “safe shore of normality.” His answer is that the poems are the “distillation of actual circumstances. They portray the terror of a mind collapsing under

pressures that exceed its endurance” (24). Cody later examines the poem in terms of being a summary of the major symptomatology of someone gone catatonic:

There has also occurred such a complete loss of affective and meaningful contact with the human environment that time has lost its meaningthe second stanza is an epitome of the clinical appearance of catatonia. Here, perfectly delineated, is the automatized (“Wooden”), apathetic wandering, indifferent alike to direction, survival, or obligation (“Ground, or Air, or Ought”)... With reference to the psychosis, what is ultimately relinquished is not so much consciousness but a portion of reality....what can be “Remembered, if outlived” is the gradual loss of self-awareness and contact with the environment through the dissolution of the ego (329).

Whether or not ED was catatonic can be debated, but certainly her isolation would have given her the time acutely to feel and process her pain instead of being forced to move on from it, as those who interact with the real world inevitably do to some extent.

“After great pain” was written before the death of either of ED’s parents, but her equating winter imagery with the dead was in place at the time she wrote this poem.

Years later when her mother was on her deathbed, ED wrote, “Her dying feels to me like many kinds of Cold – at times electric, at times benumbing – then a trackless waste” (qtd. in Sewall, 89).

The next poem, "This World is not Conclusion," is another one of ED's more famous poems. She again explores her fascination with immortality, while demonstrating her resistance to easy answers. This poem follows the pattern of an assured opening statement breaking down in anomie as the poem progresses. ED thinks that the hope of immortality is ungrounded in human wisdom – science, philosophy, and theology. Faith is personified as a silly young girl who "slips – and laughs, and rallies." She mocks the pulpit orator, who gives "Must Gesture" and "Strong Hallelujahs" (an alternate reading for "Strong" is given by ED, the word "Sure," that antithesis of doubt). Her obsession with the afterlife is one that she admits has been shared by others for "Generations." She universalizes the human experience of these thoughts, using the memorable metaphor: "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul --."

The next poem, "It will be Summer – eventually" echoes the other summer poem of fascicle 18, "I know a place where summer strives." This poem seems to have been written in winter, for she is longing for the life of summer, which she vividly describes, even populating the scene with "Ladies – with parasols," "Sauntering Gentlemen," and "little Girls – with Dolls." And of course, the scene also includes flowers (lilacs, swaying with "purple load" and the "Wild Rose" and "Aster") and bees. The last stanza of the poem evokes the bittersweet mood of "I know a place where summer strives." With the coming of autumn, and winter, summer surrenders, and here she "folds her miracle, as Women – do – their Gown --."

The following poem, “My Reward for Being, was This,” again addresses the issue of bliss. I see this poem as addressing the kind of bliss that would come from the consummation of physical love. In After Great Pain, Cody explains that he thinks that this poem is part of ED’s love story, recalling a “supreme climactic event” that was all too brief. He believes this “Reward for Being” is the same experience she refers to as her “one blessing” in another poem (Johnson 756). He thinks that ED felt that this experience was so scantily allotted to her that it might have been only one blissful day (368). The last line of the poem, however, refers to “The Ballots of Eternity,” implying that this might be a poem about heavenly bliss. Perhaps it is about both, for consummation and heaven seem equally inaccessible to ED.

The next poem, “’Twas the old – road – through pain –,” along with “Within my garden rides a bird,” are the only narrative poems in the fascicle. ED refers to the difficulties of heaven again, as she calls the road stopping at Heaven “unfrequented... With many a turn – and thorn.” This poem represents the journey of life, using the almost allegorical metaphor of a woman walking down a road and leaving behind objects that she will not need when she rests. The poem emphasizes the ordinary objects left behind by one who journeys into death: “her little Book,” “Her very Hat”, and “This worn shoe.” Sewall describes this poem as “humanity at the limits of sovereignty” (491). The tension between ED’s incredible humanity and wealth of knowledge of the human condition – and her solitude – is indeed prevalent in many of her poems.

The second to last poem of fascicle 18 seems to be a sort of resignation, “At least – to pray – is left – is left.” But, as she so often does, she begins to doubt even this one comfort, for, she tells Jesus, “I know not where thy chamber is – I’m knocking – everywhere.” She directly combats the Gospel, “Knock and it shall be opened unto you;” instead, it seems as though ED has almost completely despaired of finding Jesus.

The last poem of fascicle 18, “Better – than Music!,” is as close as ED gets to finding Bliss in the fascicle. The third line of the poem is key: “This – was different – ‘Twas Translation.” The word “translation” (from the Latin *translatare* meaning to carry over or across) would have carried biblical connotations for ED. She was fascinated by the story of Elijah going to heaven in a chariot of fire, rising without dying to be seen again at Christ’s Transfiguration. The poem is filled with biblical vocabulary – “Eden,” “the Church,” “the last Saint,” “Redemption,” and “the Throne.” It seems that only the Bible provided ED with the profound imagery she needed to describe her experience. Eberwein explains that in this poem ED feels,

afloat on the wind by virtue of her own poetry and may have considered herself to have transcended her original identity and attained a kind of heaven by God lifting her in imagination over the barrier of death without her directly experiencing it (36).

ED is expressing her feeling that her poetry was a gift from God, a gift “Better – than Music,” and a gift that gives her permission to transcend herself and death. We have seen

her struggling with doubt throughout the fascicle, but in this poem ED is asserting that her gift of words is one so powerful and transcendent, it must be from the Divine.

Small analyzes the rhyme scheme of “Better – than Music,” which he points out has an ABA structure. The first two stanzas contain full rhymes, and the next three partial rhymes. In the last stanza, the full rhymes are restored. Small says that this arrangement reflects the pattern of lyric narration in the poem,

rhapsodizing first about a wonderful ‘strain’ the speaker has heard, then
wandering off to a consideration of legends about Eden and its ‘better – Melody,’
and at last returning to the wonderful ‘tune’ (93).

The digression into talking about Eden and abandoning full rhyme is brought upon by the recollection of the “Keyless Rhyme,” a blissful musical experience that ED can now only dimly remember. It is a tune not only inherited as memory from the legendary past – passed down from Eden – but also echoed in ED’s actual experience. Her mission is to not forget this translation, this melody, so she will continue humming and rehearsing it until she will sing it at the throne of immortality. I do not see the Throne as the throne of the Christian God she has come to doubt. Instead, she has found comfort, bliss, translation in thought of the throne of poetic immortality.

Throughout the fascicle, ED wrestles with her fear of mortality – manifesting itself in poems about winter, great pain, death, love forever lost, and a God whose existence she cannot prove. She cannot find the blissful assurance she seeks through

conventional means. The experience of bliss has come from the poems themselves – the Word. One hundred and thirty years later, there is no doubt that ED fulfilled her wish for immortality.

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W x
 He strained my faith -
 Did he find it - ^{supper}?
 Shook my strong trust -
 Did it - then - ^{find}?

Hurled my bliss -
 But - did he shatter it -?
 Racked - with suspense -
 Not - a nerve failed!

Wounding me - with anguish -
 But - I never doubted him -
 Or - must he - I deemed it -
 'Tho' for what wrong
 He did never say -

Started - while I said
 His secret - forgiveness -
 I knew - it's just ^{all} ^{that} I ^{had}!
 Don't you know - me?
 Why - I say - me?

No.

0 + L N

I tend my flowers for thee -
Bright - Maudslayi!
My Fuchsia's Coral Seams
Rip - White - the Sinner. Dreams -

339

Geraniums - tint - and spot -
• In Clivia - cot -
My Cactus. Splits his Beard
To show his throat -

Carnations - tip their spice -
And Bees - pick up -
A Hyacinth. I kiss -
Put out - a ruffled head -
• And odors fall
From flasks - so small -
You marvel how they hold -

White Roses - shake their satin
flakes -
Open my Garden floor -

These fair + fictitious People -
The Women + plucked away
from our familiar + lifetime.
The Men of Ivory -

499

Those Boys and Girls, in Canvas
- Who + stay open the wall + dwell
In everlasting + Respiration -
+ Can Anybody tell?

We trust - in places
Perfect -
Inheriting Delight
+ Beyond our + faint Conjecture.
+ Our + tiny Estimation -
+ Small + scanty -
Remembering ourselves, we trust -
Are Pleased - Than we.
Through Knowing - where we
only + hope -
+ Receiving - where we - pray -

Two

+

After great pain, a formal
piling comes.

The snow is enormous,
like fumes.

The stiff heart-questions was
it- the, that one

And yesterday, or centuries before?

¹ The fast-mechanical, go round-

³ Off ground, or air, or capital-

² A wooden way

⁴ Regardless grown,

A Quartz Contentment, like
a stone.

This is the hour of lead-

Remembered, if out-lived,

No turning persons, & collect-
the snow-

First. Child - then Sliver. Then

the letting go.

This World is not Conclusion.
 A⁺ Species stands by and
 Invisibly, as Music.
 But poising, as Sound.
 It beckons, and it baffles.
 Philosophy, don't know.
 And through a Riddle at the last
 Sagacity must go.
 To guess it puzzles Scholars.
 To gain it, Men have borne
 Contempt of Generals
 And Pacification, shown.
 Faith slips, and Laughs, and rallies
 Blushes, if any be.
 Plucks at a twig of Evidence,
 And asks a Van, the way-

Much Gesture, from the
Pulpit -
Strong Hallucinations
Narcotics cannot still the
torture
that rattle at the soul.

+ a equal - + prove it -
+ Sure - + Mouse -

4 -

x1

Better - than Music!
For I - who heard it -
I was used - to the Birds -
upon -
This - was different - 'Twas
translation -
Of all tunes I knew -
and more -

'Twas it - contained - like other
stanzas -
No one could play it - the
second time -
But the Composer - perfect -
moral -
Fried with him - that
kyles rhyme!

! +

So - Children - told him Books
in Eden -
Buried a better melody -

Eudine's eyes - Two great -
Sundered -
Urging the feet - that would
not - H -

Children + mangled - are mis-
most -
Even - a Legend - dimly told -
Even - and the Anguish -
Grandmother's story -
But - I was telling a
tale - I heard -

Not - such a strain - The
Church - baptisms -
When the Last Saint -
goes up the aisle -
Not - such a stanza
splendid the silence - +
When the Redemption strikes
her bells -

Let me not spill - it's
Smallest cadence -
Humming - for promise - or then
Alms -
Humming - until my faint -
Rehearsal -
+ Leap into time - Around the
Throne -

+ Assured that + grown up -
+ Learned + Crowned + Shakes -
+ Loss + Waste -

Annotated Bibliography

Bray, Robert. "Why Thoughts are Better than Music or Emily Dickinson's Fascicle 18 as a Lyric Sequence," 2000.

In his essay analyzing fascicle 18 as a poetic sequence (I was not aware of this article's existence when I chose F.18!), Bray places all 17 poems on a mathematical graph that roughly creates a sin wave (simple harmonic motion). The y-axis is ED's state of being, from 1 (gnosis, bliss, Heaven – the synaesthesia achieved at "Better than Music!") to -1 (agnosis, anguish, Hell – the anesthesia of "After Great Pain"). Bray's comparison of ED to a "Great Designer," a God-like creator of the fascicles, is an analogy I particularly like. This essay proved helpful to my own interpretations of F.18, and I was in most agreement with his thoughts on "Better than Music!"

Cody, John. After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Cody offers evidence from the world of psychiatry to imply that ED suffered from various mental illnesses and had serious breakdowns. He uses her poetry as writings of a "patient" for his psychography, a practice which I find deplorable. His conclusion that ED's inadequate mother and deprivation of affection at a young age caused her to have psychic imbalance is speculative and, I think, irrelevant. Cody is convincing in his idea

that ED imagines more events than she experiences, but his final conclusion, that without ED's emotional deprivation and psychic imbalance we would not have such great poetry, is sentimental in its neo-Romantic nostalgia for madness.

Coghill, Sheila and Tammaro, Thom, ed. Visiting Emily: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Emily Dickinson. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000.

This collection of ED-inspired poetry by luminary figures such as John Berryman, Billy Collins, Donald Hall, Joyce Carol Oates, Alicia Ostiker, Adrienne Rich, and Richard Wilbur includes poems that range from hilarious ("Emily's To-Do List" and "Emily Dickinson Attends a Writing Workshop") to reverent and deeply moving (Collins' "Taking off Emily Dickinson's Clothes" and Galway Kinnell's "The Deconstruction of ED"). I highly recommend this collection to any Emily-head!

Davis, Thomas, ed. 14 by Emily Dickinson with Selected Criticism. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Company, 1964.

This collection of essays includes commentary by critical heavyweights Thomas Johnson, Cleanth Brooks, and Eric Carlson. There are 3 to 5 essays on each of the 14 selected poems, which include "After Great Pain" and "This World is Not Conclusion" from fascicle 18. Most of the short essays are simply ad hoc practical criticism, and some are painfully obvious readings. Some critics, though, bring other poems and letters into their

discussion, creating thoughtful comparisons, as is the case with Henry W. Wells' commentary on "This World is not Conclusion" (p. 72).

Eberwien, Jane Donahue. Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985.

Eberwien's astute and thorough critical analysis of ED's life and work proposes that ED was more comfortably situated in her narrow circle, her secluded life, than most contemporary scholars would choose to acknowledge. To support this claim, Eberwien draws upon biographical sources, creative readings of ED poetry, and contemporary memoirs, particularly those of Austin and Mabel Loomis Todd. Her idea, that ED's relation to her limited acquaintance parallels a theogony in which God, being limitless, is scarcely present in a limited material world, was important in my consideration of poems like, "It's Thoughts and just One Heart" and "Better than Music!"

Franklin, R.W., ed. The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981.

This hefty two-volume collection reproduces the actual manuscripts of all of Emily Dickinson's surviving poems. There is absolutely no substitute for reading a fascicle in ED's own hand, and seeing her cross-outs and self-editing. Her underlining can be heartbreaking ("But what of That?") and her whirling *W*'s and dramatic, sweeping *T*'s are

exquisite and energized. To look at ED's fierce handwriting is such an intimate and transformative act that I often find myself overwhelmed.

———. The Poems of Emily Dickinson Variorum Edition. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.

Now considered the definitive complete collection of ED poetry, the Franklin variorum is the result of Franklin's scrupulous scholarship and research, which included the reconstruction of ED's fascicles using her actual manuscripts. In this 3-volume edition, the poems are placed back into their fascicle order, establishing a chronology different from Johnson's. Each poem is presented with every known variation and rewrite, and a complete publication history. This information is invaluable to anyone studying ED poems, though it makes the book difficult to read as a collection of poetry.

Johnson, Thomas, ed. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1961.

The 1955 publication of Johnson's *Complete Poems* was a seminal event for ED scholarship. This three-volume critical edition was the first complete collection of ED poetry. The 1961 one-volume edition brings together all 1,775 ED poems. Many critics continue to refer to ED poems by their "Johnson number." It is now assumed that Johnson's chronology is inaccurate, and this collection has been surpassed by the

Franklin variorum, which, while being much less readable than the Johnson, is a much more accurate way to read Dickinson.

———. Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

“You ask me to excuse the freedom of your letter, dear A. I think all things should be free with friends” (letters 1:32). This book of letters (or Johnson’s 1958 3-volume “complete” collection) is the single-most helpful piece of literature for understanding ED the person. In her letters, ED’s awareness, sensitivity, freedom, passion, humor, and candor are displayed so profoundly that one feels as though she is reading ED’s very soul.

———. Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson’s Poems. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1961.

For this book, Johnson chose 576 poems out of the 1775 which form the body of ED poetry. Most of ED’s best-loved poems are in this book, though there are a few disappointing omissions. *Final Harvest* was my first exposure to ED, and it makes a great introduction to the world of ED (I frequently give it away as a Christmas present!).

Langton, Jane and Burkert, Nancy Ekholm. Acts of Light: Poems by Emily Dickinson. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980.

This beautiful book begins with an illuminating and thoughtful appreciation of ED by mystery writer Jane Langton, followed by a lovely selection of ED poems accompanied by Ekholm's gorgeous paintings. The paintings are aesthetically pleasing in their own right, but become particularly impressive when one reads the artist's notes. Ekholm draws from imagery in many of ED's poems and letters to create the paintings, and she recreates many actual artifacts from the Dickinson estate to evoke the atmosphere of ED's Amherst life.

Langton, Jane. Emily Dickinson is Dead. New York: Viking Penguin, 1985.

This Homer Kelly murder mystery is set at Amherst College, during a memorial symposium celebrating the 100th anniversary of Dickinson's death. For ED fans, the humor is right-on. I particularly like the way Langton deals with the ownership phenomena amongst ED scholars ("She's *my* Emily!").

Lundin, Roger. Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998.

In his biography, literary theorist and intellectual historian Lundin calls ED "one of the most brilliantly enigmatic religious thinkers this country has ever known." His focus throughout the book is ED's various struggles with belief, but as a Christian scholar I think that Lundin is more optimistic about ED's relationship with God than is warranted.

However, his commentary on the issue of religion proved helpful to me when approaching the four faith poems of fascicle 18. Also, Lundin's approach to this biography is interesting – he shows ED's connections to many of the developments of the 19th century, citing Darwin, Longfellow, and Whitman along the way.

Oberhaus, Dorothy. Emily Dickinson's Fascicles: Method & Meaning. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

This is the only book-length analysis of a fascicle as a sequence, and is of note for that fact alone. However, its uniqueness is unfortunate, as the conclusion Oberhaus draws from her analysis of ED's fascicle 40 (her "last") are that these poems, and, she implies, the entire ED canon, place ED poetry "within the tradition of Christian devotion." Her book traces Biblical allusions and metaphors through what she calls a three-part meditation on her way of life as a "Christian poet-pilgrim." I'll admit, I did not finish this book – it is difficult to read something with which I completely disagree.

Patterson, Rebecca. Emily Dickinson's Imagery. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 1979.

Patterson's career as an ED scholar was controversial, primarily due to the fact that she was the first scholar to suggest that ED had a lesbian attachment to her sister-in-law Sue. In the first chapter of this book, Patterson discusses the climate of 19th century Amherst,

an environment hostile to female writers. She analyzes the masculine elements of ED's character, comparing her to women writers like George Eliot, who were forced to take on male roles. Patterson uses this assumed masculine identity to imply various unconscious processes at work in ED's imagery. The succeeding chapters are devoted to tracing particular image patterns, while arguing that ED's recurrent imagery is a symbolic expression of her unconscious feelings. Many of her observations are original and astute, and are obviously drawn from a deep understanding of ED as a person and a poet that came from Patterson's decades of devoted scholarship.

Sewall, Richard. The Life of Emily Dickinson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Because so little is known about the details of ED's life, in this definitive biography Sewall turns his focus to what is known about those around ED – her friends and family – believing that this information will provide clues to ED's life and character. Sewall devotes much of his 800-page book to studying ED's immediate family members, and cites many letters which illuminate the natures of her relationships with these people. By the end of the biography, a clear and careful picture of the life surrounding ED is rendered, however, Sewall's lack of direct confrontation with ED herself leaves the reader needing and wanting more. However, the book is readable, exhaustive and invaluable. It is particularly good when discussing ED's brother Austin, his wife Sue, and

his mistress Mabel Loomis Todd, and implying the effects this family feud had on the poet.

Shoobridge, Helen. "Reverence for each Other Being the Sweet Aim: Dickinson Face

To Face with the Masculine." Emily Dickinson Journal. 9.1 (2000) 87-111.

Online. Project Muse. 18 November 2001.

Feminist critic Helen Shoobridge uses the Master letters, ED's letters to Otis Lord, and various love poems to interpret ED's encounters with the masculine other. She contends that when ED addresses the Master her goal is to educate him on how to love, and to make him hear her and acknowledge that she is different, not inferior. She makes some interesting points about ED's femininity and relationships with men, and her remarks on ED's use of flower imagery (esp. in 'I tend my flowers for thee') enhanced my reading.

Small, Judy Jo. Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson's Rhyme. Athens: University of

Georgia Press, 1990.

The great achievement of this book is that Small manages to analyze ED's erratic, sometimes unsettling use of rhyme in a way that illustrates that ED's unique – though very female – perspective of the world is highlighted by her creative approach to language. Her meticulous word-by-word analyses of slant rhymes, rhyme schemes, alliterations, poetic dissonance, etc., never get bogged down, and often bring about

interesting ideas as Small comments on why ED chose the words she did. I particularly liked her ideas pertaining to “Within my Garden Rides a Bird.”

Smith, Martha Nell. Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

This is my favorite book written about ED, and it explores two ideas that were vital to my study of ED. The first idea of Smith’s that I admired is the importance of ED’s relationship with Sue. Smith cites a number of letters that highlight the desperate crush ED has on Sue, and also bring light to the importance of Sue as a creative collaborator. Her assertion that ED and Sue’s relationship was “lesbian” (a word she redefines in a less sexual way) might alarm readers, but ED’s love for Sue should not be underestimated and Smith’s book helped me realize this. Smith shows examples of a century of downplaying and hiding this relationship – starting with Austin’s severe erasing and editing of the women’s correspondence. Their relationship was continually obscured and diminished by scholars, and Smith’s book is a bold achievement for the unabashed way she deals with the issue. Another important theory of Smith’s is her idea that ED’s fascicles were a form of self-publishing. She points out that ED sent one-third of her poems out in letters (by far the most were sent to Sue) and these and the 40 fascicles were the only way, barring publication, that ED could control her poetry.

Todd, Mabel Loomis, Ed. Letters of Emily Dickinson. New York: The World Publishing Company, 1951.

In October of 1894, eight years after ED's death, Mabel Loomis Todd edited and published this selection of ED's letters. It is by no means a definitive collection, but the notes made by Todd, a personal friend of ED's (and her brother Austin's mistress) are insightful and interesting. Her introductory comments are particularly intriguing, she almost apologizes for the morbidity of her friend's poetry: "Emily Dickinson's verses, often but the reflection of a passing mood, do not always completely represent herself, –rarely, indeed, showing the dainty humor, the folic-some gayety, which continually bubbled over in her daily life. The somber and even weird outlook upon this world and the next, characteristic of many of the poems, was by no means a prevailing condition of mind."

Your Birthday in Wisconsin You Are 140

JOHN BERRYMAN

'One of the wits of the school' your chum would say –
Hot diggity! – What the *hell* went wrong for you,
Miss Emily, – besides the 'pure & terrible' Congressman
your paralyzing papa, – and Mr Humphrey's dying
& Benjamin's (the other reader)? . . .

Fantastic at 32 outpour, uproar, 'terror
since September, I could tell to none'
after your 'Master' moved his family West
and timidly to Mr Higginson:
'say if my verse is alive.'

Now you wore only white, now you did not appear,
till frantic 50 when you hurled your heart
down before Otis, who would none of it
thro' five years for 'Squire Dickinson's cracked daughter'
awful by months, by hours . . .

Well. Thursday afternoon, I'm in W———
drinking your ditties, and (dear) *they* are alive, –
more so than (bless her) Mrs F who teaches
farmers' red daughters & their beaux *my* ditties
and yours & yours & yours!
Hot diggity!

Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes

BILLY COLLINS

First, her tippet made of tulle,
easily lifted off her shoulders and laid
on the back of a wooden chair.

And her bonnet,
the bow undone with a light forward pull.

Then the long white dress, a more
complicated matter with mother-of-pearl
buttons down the back,
so tiny and numerous that it takes forever
before my hands can part the fabric,
like a swimmer's dividing water,
and slip inside.

You will want to know
that she was standing
by an open window in an upstairs bedroom,
motionless, a little wide-eyed,
looking out at the orchard below,
the white dress puddled at her feet
on the wide-board, hardwood floor.

The complexity of women's undergarments
in nineteenth-century America
is not to be waved off,
and I proceeded like a polar explorer
through clips, clasps, and moorings,
catches, straps, and whalebone stays,
sailing toward the iceberg of her nakedness.

Later, I wrote in a notebook
it was like riding a swan into the night,
but, of course, I cannot tell you everything –
the way she closed her eyes to the orchard,

how her hair tumbled free of its pins,
how there were sudden dashes
whenever we spoke.

What I can tell you is
it was terribly quiet in Amherst
that Sabbath afternoon,
nothing but a carriage passing the house,
a fly buzzing in a windowpane.

So I could plainly hear her inhale
when I undid the very top
hook-and-eye fastener of her corset

and I could hear her sigh when finally it was unloosed,
the way some readers sigh when they realize
that Hope has feathers,
that reason is a plank,
that life is a loaded gun
that looks right at you with a yellow eye.

Two Ghosts

ROBERT FRANCIS

Amherst. Dark hemlocks conspiring at the First Church midway
between the Mansion on Main Street and the back entrance (the escape
door) of the Lord Jeffery Inn. Between one and two after midnight.

- R Someone is here. Angelic? Or demonic?
E Someone less than someone.
R Emily?
E How could you divine me?
R An easy guess, you who were ghost while living
and haunting us ever since.
E A ghost to catch a ghost?
R A poet to catch a poet.
E And you – you must be the Robert who said:
“The petal of the rose it was that stung.”
Or did I say it?
R We both have said it now.
E Sweet the bee – but rose is sweeter –
Quick his sting – but rose stings deeper –
Bee will heal – rose petal – never
R You talk of bees who were yourself white moth.
E Seldom flitting so far from home.
Oftener the other way to touch my stone.
Have you seen it?
R *Called Back?*
E The stone keeps calling me back.
R I would have cut a different epitaph.
Called on. Called ahead.
E But on and back are both one now, aren't they?
R My stone is not a stone but a heap, a pile –
E Why should immortality be so stony?
R – a mass, a mausoleum, a mock mountain
over there. Have you seen?
E Oh, I took *that* for a factory or fort.
R Fort of learning, factory of scholars.
And my name cut deep in granite. Have you seen?
E I never dared to go so far – so near.
R Less than someone,” you said. I say,
“More than someone.” You are a name now, Emily.
E Why do they hunt me so?
R The scholar-savengers?
E Once I could hide but now
they try my mind, they pry
apart my heart.
R We were both hidiers. You
in your father's house. I
in the big buzzing world.

- I craved to be understood
but feared being wholly known.
E You said, “Anything more than the truth
would have seemed too weak.”
R And you, “Truth like ancestors' brocades
can stand alone.” I should say truth
is not the dress but the naked lady.
E Or naked gentleman.
R Have it as you will.

(A tower clock strikes two)

- R There's truth for you.
To tell the truth
is all a clock can do.
E But clocks are human – like us all –
They err – grow ill – and finally fail.
R They never lie intentionally.
E Why did you say, “Nature's first green is gold?”
Some buds, yes, but the buds of beech are cinnamon,
and the swamp maple – but need I tell you?
R And why – why did you say:
“Nature rarer uses yellow than another hue?”
Think of the dandelions, Emily, the fields
of solid yellow. Think of the forsythias
and buttercups. The sugar maple's pendant blooms,
the cowslips, cinquefoil, golden Alexanders,
the marigolds and all the goldenrods.
Witch-hazel and October trees: beech, elm,
maple, popple, apple!
E Why did Emerson, your Emerson, my Emerson, say,
“Succory to match the sky?” Imagine!
R Your lines that haunt me most –
E What are they?
R “After great pain a formal feeling comes.
The nerves sit ceremonious like tombs.”
E Oh! Oh!
R “After great pain –”
E And that line of yours:
“Weep for what little things could make them glad.”
R I was writing of children.
E We are all children.
R Laugh at what little things could make them weep.
E Can make us all weep. Were you a believer?
R I took the dare to believe. I made myself
believe I believed. And you?
E Two angels strove like wrestlers in my mind:
one belief, one disbelief.
R “After great pain –”
E Oh!
R Emily? Emily!

Emily Dickinson's Sestina for Molly Bloom

BARBARA F. LEFCOWITZ

At times I almost believed it: madness
the only way to say yes,
to stumble into shapes of night
that gape open
like abandoned wells –
This would work like no other

disguise – yet I chose another
route, neither mad
nor well
enough to shout yes!
when morning scissor-blades opened
my sack of night

full of valentines to death – Night
whose curve of darkness I preferred to other
hours' slanting light that would open
all my closed lives – not the madly
flowered darkness that would make *you* say yes!
But – I might as well

admit it – the well-
sealed kind of night
where I could nod yes
to another
sputter of benign madness
from the loaded gun of an open

wound whose red opening
was never stanching well
enough; if only I hadn't feared the mad
shudder-burst & bloom demanded by your night
I would have become another
woman, spread open like a figtree in my father's
northern garden, Yes

or – yes!
a house with its shutters open
to another
throng of lovers climbing my well-
flowered hair night after night,
all Amherst going mad,

its quartz contentment split open by the pulsing night –
Molly, as well become you as another –
Yes, and my heart going like mad and yes saying yes
I will yes!

Emily Dickinson Reading Walt Whitman

BARTON LEVI ST. ARMAND

I heard he was disgraceful, and he is!
The bearded rapist lurking in these folds
of velvet mossy-green, the Gift Book's gilt –
so innocent, so flowery, so genteel!
How could Father guess? No doubt he thinks
it is some girlish album full of gush
bought by his cast-iron railroad stock
(a striped adder nestling in the pile
of books he buys and begs me not to read).
What would Father do? He sits in state
below, assured the pious pages of
the *Sabbath Visitor* have nothing carnal in them
(dry as starched papyrus in the tomb),
while Emily receives a private caller.
"I mind how we lay in June, such a
transparent summer morning:
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently
turned over upon me.
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your
tongue to my barestript heart . . ."
Did Father feel like this when sanctified?
Signed, sealed, delivered by Christ's blizzard-kiss
to title in the company of Saints?
"These are the thoughts of all men in all ages . . .
They are not original with me . . ."
My hands grow stiff as death; physically I feel
as if the top of my head were taken off;
in spite of the squat air-tight's patent heat,
I turn so cold no fire can ever warm me.
Can this be poetry, or is it God
come for me as Father said he would?
"I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of all people, all
just as immortal and fathomless as myself;
They do not know how immortal, but I know . . ."
If this be "poison," then I down my dram!

"Who need be afraid of the merge?
Undrape. . . you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded,
I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no,
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless . . . and
can never be shaken away . . ."

What rosy fingers nibble at my gown?
". . . voices veiled, and I remove the veil . . ."

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The picket gate goes "chunk," and latches shut.

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Not my veil. No, that remains untouched;
inviolable, invisible, unassumed –
This *camerado* shall not penetrate
where sister, brother, lover drown alone
and even dread Jehovah skulks away,
cheated of the final nudity.
A poker stirs the white ash of the coals
as I consign these *Leaves* to leaves of flame,
without the Quaker poet's righteous wrath
(poor Whittier could not believe his eyes!).

"I depart as air . . . I effuse my flesh in eddies and
drift it in lacy jags . . ."

My web is cleansed. Dear Father will not know
the heathen suttee blazing in his house
destroying and preserving for that once
which is Eternity.

Now I can write
again to Mr. Higginson who said
of Mr. Whitman it was no discredit
that he wrote his book but only that
he did not take and burn it afterwards.